

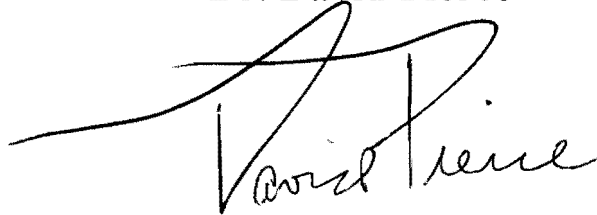
Improving Major League Soccer

An Honors Thesis (HONRS 499)

By

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A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "David Pierce". The signature is fluid and cursive, with a long horizontal stroke extending to the left from the start of the name.

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ABSTRACT

Major League Soccer was created to help develop the game of soccer in America.

Improving Major League Soccer explains ways in which Major League Soccer can alter its schedule, league format, and player and roster regulations in order to improve its popularity domestically and credibility internationally while continuing to develop the game in America. I used my own ideas that were developed during my internship with Real Salt Lake of Major League Soccer as the foundation for my plan for Major League Soccer's improvement.

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Improving Major League Soccer

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

As Major League Soccer enters its teenage years it is time for the league to determine a plan of action as they attempt to grow from a niche league to one of the major leagues in the American sport landscape. The league has already evolved as it has added new teams and significantly diversified its ownership groups as well as changed roster rules and regulations to improve the quality of its product. However, this is just the beginning and there are still relatively simple changes in league schedule, league format, and roster and player acquisition rules that can improve Major League Soccer's image both domestically and internationally.

Beginning with the schedule, the league could begin by playing more midweek matchdays, specifically on Wednesdays. Though the league currently has a midweek game on Thursday nights for ESPN's MLS Primetime Thursday, this could be moved to Wednesday nights to create a potentially larger audience and make it easier to then have matches on Saturdays. The league could also begin the season a few weeks earlier so that they could honor international fixture dates, which would give them more credibility abroad and allow the league's better players to play in more league matches. Also, in order to increase league visibility domestically, it could air matches on Saturday afternoons during the summer months on ABC after the NBA season has ended and before the NCAA football season begins.

Next, Major League Soccer should change its international tournament qualification criteria. The top eight teams at the end of the regular season based on points alone should all qualify for an international tournament the following year. The top four should qualify for the more prestigious CONCACAF Champions League while the next four qualify for the least prestigious but equally important SuperLiga. This would help eliminate the fixture congestion

that often negatively affects MLS teams during the middle of their regular season. This ranking should also be used to determine who makes the playoffs. The league should eliminate conference differentiation in the playoffs and have the top eight teams in points make the playoffs. Then the league should change the semi-finals to a home-and-home aggregate scoring series to give teams that advance that far a guaranteed home playoff game and therefore more revenue for their advancement.

The most drastic changes should be made to Major League Soccer roster rules and regulations and the rules that govern player acquisition. First, the league should add two international player slots to its current 28-man roster to help teams have more roster depth for their participation in supplementary tournaments. Then, it should increase the minimum salary of developmental players to at least \$20,000. This would be a greater incentive for recent college graduates to take a chance with MLS as opposed to going to the USL, American minor league soccer, for a better pay day. Next, the league should discontinue counting designated players' salaries against the salary cap to give an incentive for teams to invest in some top talent and attract more international stars to MLS. Finally, the league should eliminate the allocation and discovery signing rules in regards to player acquisition. The best way to do this is to shift away from their single-entity structure so teams can sign players themselves as opposed to players signing with the league.

The final step the league needs to make involves expansion. The next four expansion teams need to be located in Miami, St. Louis, New York City, and a second Canadian city. This expansion would create more regional rivalries and expands the league's footprint. Also, if the league continues to grow and eventually reaches 24 to 32 teams, then it should split into two divisions of 12 to 16 teams, depending on overall league size, and institute a system of

promotion and relegation. This would greatly enhance the league's image abroad because it would match the system of promotion and relegation used across the world.

All of these changes over the next few years could help transform Major League Soccer from a struggling league into a staple in the American sport landscape. All of these issues are things that are constantly under consideration by the leagues board of directors and up to this point they have seemed to make the right decisions for the league at the right times. If they do the same with these changes in ten years we could see more people walking around big cities and college campuses wearing MLS apparel than NFL apparel.

INTRODUCTION

Major League Soccer started in order to fulfill a promise the United States Soccer Federation made to Fédération Internationale de Football Association (FIFA) in order to host the World Cup and has quickly grown into the *SportsBusiness Journal* Professional Sports League of the Year (Major). During its thirteen years of existence MLS has come a long way and made many improvements. However, there are many problems the league still has to address as it enters its teenage years of operation. From the league format to player salaries to player acquisitions, there are many questions that the league will have to find answers to in the upcoming years in order to continually grow into one of the major leagues in the United States. These are issues that other American leagues have not had to deal with because of the differences in league organization.

Major League Soccer operates very differently from the “big four” (NFL, NBA, MLB, NHL) professional sports league in the United States. MLS uses a single-entity structure, a form of league governance in which teams are owned by the league and the players sign contracts with the league (Parks). In this system each team’s day-to-day operations are still overseen separately by different investors, but all of the revenues and expenses are shared between each team and investor. This system was put in place to help keep the cost of player salaries under control as MLS attempts to achieve financial stability. Each player is an employee of MLS, and their contracts are negotiated through the league rather than through the individual teams, so the league has the rights to every player. In regards to player movement Major League Soccer must operate under the player movement guidelines of FIFA, the international governing body of soccer. These guidelines regarding player movement in international soccer are very different from what Americans are used to in domestic sports. Because Major League Soccer has tried to

keep player movement similar to other sports in America, but still functional within the regulations of FIFA, player movement in MLS can be very complicated. In international soccer, players who are under contract with a team can only move between teams during certain transfer windows (January 15 – April 15 and June 15 – August 15 for Major League Soccer). Also, players are rarely “traded” in the American sense; teams buy players’ rights from other teams with other players being included as compensation on rare occasions. Also, there are no collegiate drafts in other countries; all players are developed through youth academies. This leads to another reason why all players are under contract with MLS and not the individual teams, because they are under contract with the league they can be traded between teams regardless of whether or not it is during the transfer period, and they can also be drafted by teams. This allows Major League Soccer to have the American staples of collegiate drafts and player trades. A lot of these rules regarding movement can be very complicated and can be simplified through relatively simple changes in league structure. These simple changes along with other simple changes in league format, tournament qualification, and the regular season schedule would continue the league on its path to becoming one of the top sport leagues in the United States.

SCHEDULE

The Major League Soccer schedule has been a point of contention for many team executives, players, and fans since the league’s inaugural season. There are three main issues to consider: the season time frame or “window,” not honoring FIFA’s international fixture dates (Gazidis), and fixture congestion (Clubs). The current MLS schedule runs from the end of March until the end of November, which is contrary to the more popular European leagues which run from August until May. Many fans would love to see the schedule change to the same time

frame of the European Leagues so that they can share the same transfer window. However, because of the climate of the majority of Major League Soccer cities, playing throughout the winter months is not conducive to good soccer. Another issue with that would be sharing stadiums with American football teams. New England, New York, Houston, and San Jose currently share stadiums with NFL or collegiate football teams whose seasons run parallel to the MLS schedule which would make scheduling more difficult as well as increase wear on the fields or pitches. Also, football eats up a major portion of sport coverage and air time during their season which would significantly limit the amount of MLS exposure, which at this point would be poor for the league's status. Major League Soccer is clearly better suited to keep the time frame of the schedule the way it is.

Next is the issue of schedule congestion and honoring FIFA international dates. MLS teams currently compete in two different international competitions, the CONCACAF Champions League and the SuperLiga, and one national competition, the U.S. Open Cup (the Canadian Championship for Toronto FC), in addition to the MLS regular season and playoffs. All of these competitions occurring during the season can lead to an MLS team playing a possible 57 games during a calendar year (34 MLS, 14 Champions League, 5 SuperLiga, and 4 U.S. Open Cup). This can certainly lead to severe player fatigue as the 35 week MLS season wears on. Major League Soccer currently does all of this while still not honoring FIFA's international fixture dates, dates that FIFA asks soccer leagues around the world to set aside for international games. There are a couple of changes that could be made to ease this fixture congestion.

The first change would be to play more MLS regular season games on Wednesdays in order to be able to honor international fixture dates. Currently there are only a few other

midweek league matches that take place during the season other than the ESPN Primetime Thursday games, but there is never a full or half schedule of MLS matches. It would be beneficial for the league to make a change to this practice of avoiding midweek league matches. Though there are many other leagues that currently play league matches on both Wednesdays and Saturdays, Major League Soccer has tried to avoid playing midweek games because they have a much harder time drawing the same size crowds as weekend matches. However, if they were to extend the season to start in the beginning of March and add a number of Wednesday matchdays while honoring international dates next season, then they would have forty two potential matchdays in which each team could play their thirty regular season matches according to my 2009 mock schedule (Appendix A). Of those forty two matchdays, twenty six are on Saturdays and sixteen are on Wednesdays, and this schedule also includes taking two weeks off for the 2009 Confederations Cup for which the United States national team has qualified. So by just making a few select changes to the MLS schedule the league would be able to honor FIFA's international fixture dates while not overloading teams with matches during certain parts of the season. The second modification is discussed further in the tournament section, but it would be to change the qualification requirements for which teams qualify for international competitions. This would eliminate teams competing in multiple competitions at one time. All of these changes would result in MLS teams playing a maximum of fifty two games per season (34 MLS matches, 14 Champions League, and 4 U.S. Open Cup).

TELEVISION

The changes in the Major League Soccer schedule mentioned in the previous section could force changes in television coverage for MLS that might prove to be beneficial. Currently MLS has television contracts with ESPN, Fox Soccer Channel, HDNet, and Telefutera (Goff).

FSC and HDNet each currently air one MLS game a week on Saturday night. Telefutura's television deal guarantees them one MLS game per week on Sunday afternoons and also guarantees them that there will not be any other MLS games airing on national TV on Sundays. ESPN currently airs one game per week on Thursday nights, which they have branded ESPN Primetime Thursday. Occasionally there will be a U.S. National Team game played on a Wednesday which has taken the place of an ESPN Primetime Thursday telecast. However, if MLS were to play more Wednesday matchdays and honor international fixture dates, the league could ask ESPN to move their primetime game to Wednesday night. This move would also be beneficial for ratings as their current Thursday time slot competes with network television stations most popular shows. Thursday nights currently include four of the top 20 rated shows on television, with two of them being in the top four in ratings. In contrast, Wednesday night's highest rated show is ninth and there is only one other Wednesday night show in the top 20 in ratings (Top).

While there would be potential challenges in ESPN re-branding their soccer coverage to promote Wednesday nights, advantages still exist for ESPN and ABC. ESPN has put in a lot of work over the past few years branding Thursday night as Major League Soccer night on their network, so having to partially re-brand their MLS product might not be all that appealing to the network. However, because many U.S. national team games are on Wednesdays, also having MLS games on this day of the week would allow ESPN to brand a Wednesday night every week as a soccer night on ESPN, and if Major League Soccer honors international dates then there would not be any conflict between MLS and U.S. national team matches. Another opportunity for ESPN to increase weeknight ratings and for Major League Soccer to gain popularity would be to air MLS matches on Saturday afternoons on ABC during the summer when it doesn't

conflict with their NBA or NCAA Football coverage. If the league was able to accomplish getting a second game televised during the summer on Saturday afternoons on a major network it would help enhance the league's chances of being seen as a *major* sport in the United States as well as expose it to a larger market that might be more likely to then tune into midweek matches on ESPN. A more popular league with higher television rating also means more high profile sponsors and greater revenue for the league.

TOURNAMENTS

As previously mentioned, Major League Soccer teams could possibly compete in up to three tournaments during their regular season: the CONCACAF Champions League, SuperLiga, and the U.S. Open Cup or Canadian Championship. The U.S. Open Cup began in 1914 and is open to all amateur and professional teams in the United States (About). Eight Major League Soccer teams participate in the tournament with six teams receiving automatic bids based on their finish during the previous year's regular season and the remaining teams are placed into a play-in bracket with two teams emerging. These eight teams then enter the tournament in its third round where only eight other teams remain. They enter the tournament at this point because of Major League Soccer's status as the top tier of American soccer. A MLS squad has won the U.S. Open Cup in all but one year since the league began thirteen years ago.

SuperLiga has just concluded its second year of existence. It was created by Soccer United Marketing (SUM), the marketing arm of Major League Soccer, and takes the top four MLS teams according to points at the end of the previous regular season and matches them up against four professional clubs from Mexico. The competition was started to take the rivalry between the two countries' National Teams and attempt to replicate it at the club level. Though sparse on crowds in its first two years, the competition has not been short on drama as each of

the final matches came down to penalty kicks. In the SuperLiga 2007 Final, Pachuca of Mexico defeated David Beckham and the Los Angeles Galaxy, and in the SuperLiga 2008 Final the 2006 & 2007 MLS Cup finalists faced each other in a cup final once again as the New England Revolution defeated the Houston Dynamo.

The CONCACAF Champions League is a re-organization of the federation's previous club competition, the CONCACAF Champions Cup. The competition took the format of the popular UEFA Champions League, the most popular and prestigious club competition in the world which pits the best teams in Europe against each other. The CONCACAF Champions League consists of 24 teams from across the CONCACAF region (the Caribbean, Central America, and North America) that qualify based on their performance in their domestic leagues and competitions with the overall winner of the competition qualifying for the FIFA Club World Cup. At least four teams from Major League Soccer qualify each year, with Toronto FC also able to qualify via the Canadian Championship competition. The four U.S. teams that qualify for the competition are the MLS Cup winner and runner up, the Supporters Shield winner (most points at the end of the regular season), and the U.S. Open Cup champion. If any one team occupies more than one of these spots then the open spots are filled by the team with the next highest points in the regular season.

These qualification standards have quite a bit of overlap with SuperLiga and can cause severe fixture congestion for teams that are participating in both tournaments as well as the MLS regular season, and it can hurt their form in league matches as well as increase the risk for injury. A change in what teams qualify for each tournament is needed to alleviate these issues. A sensible solution would be to have the top eight teams according to points from the previous regular season qualify for an international tournament. The top four teams would qualify for the

CONCACAF Champions League because it is the more prestigious and important competition for Major League Soccer in terms of global recognition and opportunity. The second half of teams would qualify for SuperLiga, because it is still an important tournament for the growth of MLS, but it does not have the same prestige of the CONCACAF Champions League. Qualification for the U.S. Open Cup would remain unchanged. This would also give more teams a chance to earn additional revenue from international competition because they are able to have more home matches.

ROSTERS

The main goals of the league since its inception have been to grow the popularity of soccer within the country while at the same time developing American soccer players capable of playing at the highest levels in the world. To do this Major League Soccer adopted stricter regulations regarding the makeup of team rosters than any other professional league in the United States. Each team has a roster of up to 28 players that is classified into two categories, senior and developmental players. Each team can have up to 18 senior players and 10 developmental players. Developmental players must be under the age of 25 and their salaries do not count against the leagues salary cap. Of these 28 player slots, each team is granted eight international player slots which are also tradable between teams. Toronto FC is awarded ten, but the two extra spots must be used on American players and can't be traded. All other spots are given to domestic players, which constitutes U.S. citizens, green card holders, and those given special status. In Toronto, it is the same, but for Canadian citizens (Rules).

MLS teams can acquire players through a number of ways. Player trades and drafts are two mechanisms of player acquisition that most American sport fans are familiar with that are used in MLS. Major League Soccer has two drafts, the MLS SuperDraft and Supplemental

Draft. The SuperDraft consists of four rounds through which collegiate athletes and Generation Adidas players are drafted. A Generation Adidas player is one that is signed by the league either out of high school or as a collegiate player with eligibility left. The league signs between eight and twelve of these players a year. These players are developmental players that can not count against the leagues senior roster spots and also are guaranteed college scholarship money for forgoing the chance to play or continue playing college soccer. The Supplemental Draft is traditionally held a week after the SuperDraft and is just an additional four rounds with players not drafted in the SuperDraft eligible to be drafted. It was instituted to help fill the developmental rosters of each team (Rules).

Players can also be acquired via trade. There are many different things that can be used to trade for a player or things a team can trade a player for, they include: allocation list spots, allocation money, SuperDraft picks, Supplemental Draft picks, international player slots, and designated player slots. Major League Soccer also has a trade deadline that usually occurs three weeks before the end of the regular season (Rules).

Because Major League Soccer operates under a single-entity structure, all players are under contract with Major League Soccer and not the individual teams. This structure complicates the player acquisition process for MLS teams and has led to two forms of player acquisition that many American sport fans may not be familiar with, player allocation and discovery. During one season each team can file for six discovery signings, which can only be used to fill senior roster spots. These filings give the team the exclusive right to sign a certain player. If there are multiple teams who file for the same player on the same day, the right goes to the team first on the allocation list (Rules). The allocation list is set at the end of every year in reverse order of record with expansion teams being placed first. This list is used in the

aforementioned case of same day discovery filings, as well as the case of a returning U.S. International Player (an American player who was previously playing abroad and who has made an appearance for the U.S. national team during their career), and also other situations deemed necessary by the league. Each team has the chance to take the rights to the player or they can pass them on to the next team and so on. However, if you use an allocation you are then moved to the back of the line. These spots can also be traded as long as they are swapped, because no team can have more than one spot in the list, and every team must be listed. Each team is also assigned allocation money based on previous poor performance, player transfer outside of MLS, and expansion status. This money can be used to sign new players, re-sign current players, or to extend current contracts. Teams can also trade this allocated money (Rules).

Recently, the MLS also instituted the Designated Player Rule, often referred to as the David Beckham Rule, in which each team was given one designated player slot which they can use to sign a player whose salary would not be able to fall within the salary cap. These designated players or DPs get assigned a certain cap number each year regardless of the actual value of their contract. For 2008 this number was \$415,000, so the designated player's contract counts that much towards the salary cap. These slots can also be traded between teams. There are currently seven designated players on six different teams, with zero Americans currently designated players. The current DPs are David Beckham in Los Angeles, Juan Pablo Angel in New York, Cuauhtémoc Blanco in Chicago, Claudio López in Kansas City, Marcelo Gallardo and Luciano Emilio in Washington D.C., and Freddie Ljungberg in Seattle (Rules).

These complicated rules and regulations regarding player movement work with a limited number of teams and owners, but the number of MLS owners has grown from just three in 2002 to fifteen in 2008 generating a need for improvement and simplification. Major League Soccer

expansion has been happening quite frequently and is certainly not slowing down. Every new team creates more opportunities for American players as another roster must be filled, but this rapid expansion could diminish an already thinning American talent pool (Mercer). As Major League Soccer continues to grow it is important for its teams to be able to continue to put a quality product on the field. To do this they need to change some of their current roster rules and regulations. First, MLS rosters should be expanded to 30 players by adding two more *senior* roster spots. This would help decrease the effects of crowded fixtures as well as help offset the effects of rosters that could be plagued by injuries. These two additional roster spots should also be designated for international players so that the on field product continues to get better. As previously mentioned, the American talent pool is thinning as the most talent American players get more and more lucrative opportunities overseas (Haydon). It is good for American soccer that these players are getting these opportunities, but it leaves Major League Soccer giving roster spots to some American soccer players that simply aren't qualified yet to get major playing time for a professional squad (Dunivant).

Another hindrance to Major League Soccer's cause is its low salaries for developmental players. Currently the majority of developmental players have a salary of either \$12,900 or \$17,700 (Salaries). This has caused many players to either look for opportunities overseas and in lower level American soccer leagues or to choose not to pursue a career in professional soccer. Though MLS teams do not have the ability to offer these players a much larger salary, they could at least offer something that is better than the annual earnings of someone making close to minimum wage. This is sure to be an issue that the MLS Players Union will bring up when the current collective bargaining agreement that ends at the end of the 2009 season is renegotiated.

These developmental salaries should be raised to at least \$20,000 which would be equivalent to someone working forty hours a week for fifty weeks in a year for \$10 an hour.

Another key issue that needs to be addressed by Major League Soccer is the effect of designated players on the salary cap. So far designated players have not necessarily resulted in more victories for the teams that have acquired them, but that could be because of the huge hit a team takes to their salary cap because they have one or two on their team. Tim Leiweke, the President and CEO of the Anschutz Entertainment Group (owners of the Los Angeles Galaxy), has recently called for a designated player to be completely exempt from their team's salary cap (Wahl). This would give more teams an incentive to sign these high caliber players which would improve the product on the field as well as increase attendances and interest in the league.

A long-term goal of Major League Soccer also needs to be to shift away from the single entity structure. The benefit to this in terms of player acquisition is that it would do away with the need to have some of their more confusing acquisition rules (allocations and discoveries). This would also allow teams to benefit further from the revenue they receive from selling players and allow them to loan players between clubs. It would also make signing players much easier and less complicated and give Major League Soccer's players true free agency.

All of these changes would be ideal for Major League Soccer. The league would be able to attract top players (DPs) without it hurting their chances to be competitive. They would also be able to retain young American players who may be tempted by bigger paydays abroad or in other domestic leagues by increasing developmental player salaries. The league would be able to continue to provide a quality on field product while still developing new generations of American players by increasing roster sizes. Finally, the ability for MLS teams to attract top talent would increase by giving them the ability to sign players to their own contracts and do

away with confusing rules that often deter foreign players from considering Major League Soccer as a viable option.

PLAYOFF FORMAT

Major League Soccer's structure is different from that of foreign leagues. While foreign leagues use a single table format in which the champion is crowned by having the most points at the end of the regular season, MLS adopted a more American format. Major League Soccer currently has two seven team conferences based on geographic location. MLS crowns its champion through an eight team playoff just like other American leagues. The format however is different than any other leagues playoffs. The first round is a home-and-home series with aggregate scoring, a combination of both games' scores with the team scoring the most total goals advancing. The conference finals consist of only one game with the higher seeded team having home field advantage. Then the MLS Cup final also only consists of one game and is played at a neutral site.

Major League Soccer recently made changes in their playoff format. Before the 2007 season, the top four teams from each conference advanced to the post-season with the eventual conference champions meeting in the MLS Cup final just like other American leagues. However, they recently limited it to three teams from each conference with the final two playoff spots going to two "wild card" teams with the highest number of points regardless of conference. This made it possible for a team from a different conference winning the conference title of a conference that was not their own. This was done so that hopefully the best teams in the league as a whole would make the playoffs. A better way to accomplish this goal would be to have the playoffs consist of just the eight best teams from the regular season regardless of conference seeded accordingly. In this scenario it would be possible for the two best teams in the regular

season to reach the MLS Cup final regardless of their conference. Doing this eliminates the need for a one game “conference” final. It could instead be a semi-final that could be a home-and-home aggregate goal series like the first round and like the majority of other major knockout competitions like the CONCACAF or UEFA Champions League. This extra playoff game would also be a boost to the bottom line of the teams that get an additional home match.

EXPANSION & LEAGUE FORMAT

As previously mentioned, Major League Soccer has a relatively ambitious plan for further expansion. With the addition of Seattle Sounders FC in 2009 and a Philadelphia franchise in 2010, the league will have sixteen teams. The league also recently accepted bids for two more expansion franchises that will be awarded and begin play in 2011 (Mahoney). This will mean that the league will have added eight teams in seven years, which is a very rapid expansion rate.

MLS Expansion Since 2005

Chivas USA (2005)

Real Salt Lake (2005)

Toronto FC (2007)

San Jose Earthquakes (2008)

Seattle Sounders FC (2009)

MLS Philadelphia (2010)

MLS 17 (2011)

MLS 18 (2011)

Nearly doubling the size of the league in only seven years is certainly going to further test the depth of the American soccer talent pool. However, previously mentioned possible changes could certainly help facilitate the change.

Possible investors have certainly not been dissuaded from bidding though by this challenge. There are many cities and investor groups that have shown interest. Seven groups submitted bids for the 2011 expansion slots, Atlanta, Miami, Montreal, Ottawa, Portland, St. Louis, and Vancouver (Mahoney). There are many factors that need to be considered when MLS awards these spots. There were three Canadian cities that submitted bids after the great success of Toronto FC, and though Canadians has proven that they can support a team extremely well, that does not help Major League Soccer's goal of expanding the American talent pool and the popularity of the sport in the United States, which is especially important to sponsors.

The two front runners for 2011 would appear to be Miami and St. Louis. The Miami bid is attractive because it is partially backed by FC Barcelona, one of the largest clubs in the world. Another benefit of a Miami franchise is that it would expand the MLS footprint to the southeast, as the southeastern part of the U.S. currently does not contain a MLS club. St. Louis was nearly granted the spot that was given to Philadelphia, and so they go into the bidding with a leg up on the competition. St. Louis currently has the backing for a soccer-specific stadium and also has been a hotbed for American soccer talent in the past. The city was also recently awarded a Women's Professional Soccer franchise and has the roots laid for a youth soccer academy.

Moving forward though there is certainly a demand for more teams and though there have yet to be any formal plans for further expansion it is easy to see Major League Soccer quickly expanding to twenty teams in the very near future, especially with their desire for a second teams in the New York City area and Canada (Bell). This would give Major League

Soccer the same number of clubs in their top division as England, France, Italy, and Spain.

However, just expanding to eighteen teams could draw the ire of Sepp Blatter, the President of FIFA. Blatter has publicly stated that he would like to impose a cap on the number of teams in any country's top division of sixteen teams in an attempt to limit the number of matches played by these teams to a maximum of forty five per season (Clubs). On the surface this seems perfect for Major League's Soccer schedule because with sixteen teams MLS could have a balanced regular season schedule of thirty games.

However, this potential limitation may not apply to Major League Soccer for a couple different reasons. First, unlike so many other soccer leagues around the world, Major League Soccer does not have a system of promotion and relegation; they have only one division, so if any rule were to be put in place it may not apply to Major League Soccer. Also, the United States and Canada are much larger than any European nation and they have many more cities that can support a major league team. If the seven cities that recently applied for expansion were all granted franchises as well as a second New York team being awarded, MLS would have twenty four teams. This does not even include other cities that had previously expressed interest such as Cleveland, Detroit, Las Vegas, Milwaukee, Minneapolis, Phoenix, and San Diego. Major League Soccer could conceivably at some point have as many as thirty to thirty two teams like other major leagues that encompass the U.S. and Canada.

This incredible interest in expansion brings up an interesting issue for Major League Soccer. Should the league institute a system of promotion and relegation? It is common practice in the rest of the world and makes the regular season all the more exciting as teams at the bottom of the table fight to remain in the top division. It could also add a bit of intrigue to casual fans as something that sets Major League Soccer apart in the American sport landscape. This would be

something new and exciting that they are not used to and could get the casual sports fan to pay more attention to Major League Soccer and possibly become a fan. If or when the league reaches twenty eight or thirty teams it could certainly be done, because if it reaches that number than it could be assumed that the league was able to gain the popularity necessary to support that many teams. However, as it stands now each team does not have the fan base to be able to handle being promoted to a lower division. Also, it could turn casual fans that are unfamiliar with this league format away from the sport because it is so different. It would certainly give the league more stature in the international world though.

THE FUTURE

There are certainly a lot of options the league can consider as they attempt to grow the popularity and profitability of the league. Many of these issues will surely become more pertinent as the league expands and becomes more popular. The league has steadily made changes as it seemed to fit with their growth plan, but at the current rate of growth they must make sure that their rules continue to fit the changing needs of the leagues teams and sponsors. No matter how you look at it though, the future of American soccer and Major League Soccer is bright. With more and more high profile potential ownership groups like Albert Pujols in St. Louis, the New York Mets in New York, or FC Barcelona in Miami, the league gains that much more prestige and respect in both the U.S. and around the world. With a few of these easy changes it could reach this level faster than any casual American sport fan is expecting. In ten years from now all of the NFL jerseys people wear around college campus just might be Major League Soccer jerseys and the MLS Cup could be on par for ratings with the World Series, and

fall Saturday's could be MLS days as opposed to college football days. The options are there for MLS to achieve this success, but only time will tell if they are able to fulfill their potential.

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Appendix A

S 3-Jan-09		S 4-Apr-09	Matchday 6	S 4-Jul-09	Matchday 21 / Gold Cup	S 3-Oct-09	Matchday 38
W 7-Jan-09		W 8-Apr-09	CCL Semifinal	W 8-Jul-09	USOC QF / Gold Cup	W 7-Oct-09	CCL GS4 / Matchday 39
S 10-Jan-09		S 11-Apr-09	Matchday 7	S 11-Jul-09	MD 22 / SuperLiga / Gold Cup	S 10-Oct-09	Int'l
W 14-Jan-09		W 15-Apr-09	Matchday 8	W 15-Jul-09	USOC Semifinal / Gold Cup	W 14-Oct-09	Int'l
S 17-Jan-09		S 18-Apr-09	Matchday 9	S 18-Jul-09	MD 23/ SuperLiga / Gold Cup	S 17-Oct-09	Matchday 40
W 21-Jan-09		W 22-Apr-09	CCL Final	W 22-Jul-09	MD 24 / SuperLiga / Gold Cup	W 21-Oct-09	CCL GS5 / Matchday 41
S 24-Jan-09		S 25-Apr-09	Matchday 10	S 25-Jul-09	Matchday 25 / Gold Cup	S 24-Oct-09	Matchday 42
W 28-Jan-09		W 29-Apr-09	CCL Final/USOC Qual.	W 29-Jul-09	USOC Final	W 28-Oct-09	CCL GS6
S 31-Jan-09		S 2-May-09	Matchday 11	S 1-Aug-09	SuperLiga Semifinal	S 31-Oct-09	QF
W 4-Feb-09		W 6-May-09	Matchday 12	W 5-Aug-09	MLS All-Star Game	W 4-Nov-09	
S 7-Feb-09		S 9-May-09	Matchday 13	S 8-Aug-09	SuperLiga Final	S 7-Nov-09	QF
W 11-Feb-09		W 13-May-09	Matchday 14	W 12-Aug-09	Int'l	W 11-Nov-09	
S 14-Feb-09		S 16-May-09	Matchday 15	S 15-Aug-09	Matchday 26	S 14-Nov-09	Int'l / SF
W 18-Feb-09		W 20-May-09	Matchday 16	W 19-Aug-09	Matchday 27	W 18-Nov-09	Int'l
S 21-Feb-09		S 23-May-09	Matchday 17	S 22-Aug-09	Matchday 28	S 21-Nov-09	SF
W 25-Feb-09	CCL QF	W 27-May-09	USOC Qualifying	W 26-Aug-09	CCL Qual/Matchday 29	W 25-Nov-09	
S 28-Feb-09		S 30-May-09	Matchday 18	S 29-Aug-09	Matchday 30	S 28-Nov-09	MLS Cup
W 4-Mar-09	CCL QF	W 3-Jun-09	Matchday 19	W 2-Sep-09	CCL Qual/Matchday 31	W 2-Dec-09	
S 7-Mar-09	Matchday 1	S 6-Jun-09	Int'l	S 5-Sep-09	Int'l	S 5-Dec-09	
W 11-Mar-09	Matchday 2	W 10-Jun-09	Int'l/USOC Qualifying	W 9-Sep-09	Int'l	W 9-Dec-09	
S 14-Mar-09	Matchday 3	S 13-Jun-09	Matchday 20	S 12-Sep-09	Matchday 32	S 12-Dec-09	
W 18-Mar-09	CCL SF	W 17-Jun-09	Confederations Cup	W 16-Sep-09	CCL GS1 / Matchday 33	W 16-Dec-09	
S 21-Mar-09	Matchday 4	S 20-Jun-09	Confederations Cup	S 19-Sep-09	Matchday 34	S 19-Dec-09	
W 25-Mar-09	Matchday 5	W 24-Jun-09	Confederations Cup	W 23-Sep-09	CCL GS2 / Matchday 35	W 23-Dec-09	
S 28-Mar-09	Int'l	S 27-Jun-09	Confederations Cup	S 26-Sep-09	Matchday 36	S 26-Dec-09	
W 1-Apr-09	Int'l	W 1-Jul-09	USOC Round of 18	W 30-Sep-09	CCL GS3 / Matchday 37	W 30-Dec-09	

CCL
Int'l
SL
USOC

CONCACAF Champions League
International Date
SuperLiga
U.S. Open Cup

26 Saturday MDs / 2 shared
16 Wednesday MDs / 8 shared

Confederations Cup are International Dates
Gold Cup is a Regional Int'l Competition, not an Int'l Date

GS Group Stage
SF Semifinals
QF Quarterfinals
Qual Qualifying
MD Matchday

APPENDIX B

Table of Proposed Changes

<i>Category</i>	<i>Problems</i>	<i>Solutions</i>
SCHEDULE	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Does not honor international fixture dates ▪ Plays on select matches on weekdays ▪ Teams often qualify for multiple tournaments 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Begin honoring international fixture dates ▪ Play more full or half schedule Wednesday matchdays ▪ Change qualification criteria for international competitions
TELEVISION	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ ESPN's MLS Primetime Thursday is on one of television's most popular days ▪ Matches are rarely aired on network television 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Move ESPN's MLS Primetime Thursday to Wednesday ▪ Air MLS matches on Saturday afternoon during the summer months on ABC
TOURNAMENTS	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Teams often qualify for multiple tournaments 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Change qualification criteria for international competitions ▪ Take the top eight teams from the previous season based on points <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Top four qualify for the CONCACAF Champions League ▪ Next four qualify for SuperLiga
ROSTERS	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ MLS rosters are often stretched because of participation in multiple tournaments ▪ Developmental players can make as little as \$12,900 a year ▪ Designated players' salaries make it hard for teams with them to field competitive 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Expand rosters to thirty players by adding two <i>senior</i> roster spots ▪ Increase the developmental players minimum salary to at least \$20,000 ▪ Stop counting designated players' salaries against the salary cap

	<p>teams under the salary cap</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ MLS has confusing player acquisition rules 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Eliminate allocations and discoveries by shifting away from the single-entity structure
PLAYOFF FORMAT	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ The best two teams do not always have the chance to play each other in the MLS Cup 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Eliminate conference differentiation in the playoffs ▪ Make the semi-finals home-and-home aggregate series
EXPANSION	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ MLS does not have a team in the southeast region of the United States ▪ MLS could use more regional rivalries 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Expand to St. Louis and Miami in 2011 ▪ Add a second New York City and Canadian franchise in the next round of expansion
LEAGUE FORMAT	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ MLS is one of a select few leagues in the world without a system of promotion and relegation 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ If the league reaches 24 to 32 teams, institute a second division and a system of promotion and relegation ▪ Each division would have 12 to 16 teams depending on total league size